



Hidden in Plain Sight

SURFACE TREATMENT

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“Persona: Works by Alejandro Macias”

This body of work addresses the assimilation and acculturation process often referred to as “Americanization”, woven through with themes of heritage, immigration and ethnicity.

BY NANCY MOYER

SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

Alejandro Macias presents the concept of cultural assimilation with a unique and vivid vision. In “Persona: Works by Alex Macias”, the artist shares with us his experience of assimilating mainstream American life into his Mexican American background. It is a sometimes painful, sometimes beautiful, but always witty, dance between two cultures. “Persona: Works by Alex Macias” is on view at themonitor.com/art/

The culturally divisive impetus is symbolized with water paintings such as “The Deep End”, in which water symbols along the bottom of the canvas establish the artist’s fundamental Mexican cultural immersion. From here, Macias takes us on the mindful and emotional journey of his assimilation process into Americanization and ultimately to the stabilization of the Mexican American persona. As a child growing up in Brownsville, the artist at first wanted to embrace everything American. “I wanted to fit in,” he explained. “I didn’t want to feel like an outcast or anything like that. But now that I’m older I realize how dangerous that can be - to lose your identity and not even have a sense of identity, and no place to belong. It can have a lot of traumatic effects. “Persona” is a corrective self-portrait with friends along the way.

Flags, clothing, and national patterns become symbolic and formal considerations of identity in these works. They often become external markers indicating the perception of relative or desired identity. "The Space Between" speaks of not only the human space between the patterned sections of the U.S. flag and Mexican serape patterns, but the graphite medium rendering the human image is also a contrasting element between the paint areas. The figurative image seeks a place, but the indicators are resisting internalization.

The tension between the conflicting cultures snaps in the graphite drawings, where a charcoal component interrupts the established technique to convey both visual and emotional disruption. Throughout this collection, the mechanical pencil technique grounds the figure to realism; Macias considers the mechanical pencil self-portraits as symbolic of his formal upbringing. "With the charcoal effect I'm disrupting the figure," said Macias about the intense smudges emanating from human extremities. "Sometimes the hands will be intact, but the head will be blurred away like it's floating or blowing or burning. Those works talk about the assimilation process, and it's happening as we see it. So, when I called this work "Put it out! Put it out!", it was like I was literally on fire and I was trying to make the whole process go away or make it end."

A poignant image occurs in the painting, "Hidden in Plain Sight", where the figure becomes abstracted against the realism of the Mexican landscape. Internalization occurs as colors within the silhouette of the figure absorb the colors of the land. Years ago, Macias was torn between realism and abstraction. In this painting, a satisfying balance is established, both formal and psychological. Macias continues to integrate realism and abstraction, national symbols, and mixed media to express the assimilated individual. In "Republicano" the figure is a vessel filled with serape stripes exposing the Mexican soul within, but the attire is a monochromatic American style, complete with a MAGA cap and a political symbol. The silhouetted figure is reminiscent of a paper doll where only outer clothing could fluctuate.

Artists who positively impacted his work have included Carlos Gomez, Cesar Martinez, and Vincent Valdez; they have all left their mark. A residency at the Vermont Studio Center in 2016, incorporating discussions about identity, socio-political concerns, and different techniques and contemporary conditions, was a turning point in Macias' direction. "I left that residency with a fresh new perspective," he exclaimed. From that experience Macias has been able to generate a more universal expression of the Americanization process as he feels it, and how it may be felt by others going through a similar assimilation process. His conceptual expression could apply to any first or second-generation citizen whose family has deep roots in another culture.

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